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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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DEAR MEMBER,

Amid the snows of Russia millions of men have for many weeks been locked in titanic struggles. Far away in tropical India during the same weeks two individual protagonists have debated in an interchange of letters vast issues of life and death, involving the fate of multitudes, without being able to reach an understanding. No one can say which of the two events will seem to the future historian to have greater significance.

MR. GANDHI'S FAST

The drama in India is enhanced by the fact that of the two men confronting one another the one is a religious mystic, the other the bearer of political power. The contrast must not be pressed too far. Behind the Viceroy's policy lie conceptions of human good and moral responsibility which draw their sanction and nourishment from the Christian faith, and Mr. Gandhi in making demands which, as he is well aware and intends, have endless repercussions in the political sphere. But the difference remains and brings before us in the most arresting way the deepest question of human existence —the relation between the seen and the unseen.

The reason why the minds of the Viceroy and Mr. Gandhi fail to make contact with one another at any point is only partly because they differ about political matters ; it is also because their thought moves on different planes. The Viceroy's description of the fast as " political blackmail " and the Prime Minister's reference to " Mr. Gandhi's attempt to secure his unconditional release by fasting," may be mistaken translations of his action into terms of Western thought. It is an old Hindu custom to use fasting as a means of forcing someone else to do what you want ; but, on the other hand, some of Mr. Gandhi's fasts have been acts of penance for his own or other's wrong-doing.

For Mr. Gandhi, it must be remembered, the spiritual world is the supreme reality. Nearly forty years ago, he says in the correspondence, a mission was laid on him to spread truth and non-violence. He can fulfil his mission even in prison, but prison has its limits. In present circumstances the power of *satyagraha* (soul-force, or force of truth), to obey which he is dedicated, is frustrated, and this can be remedied only by some act of personal discipline ; it is in a sentence, he says, to " crucify the flesh by fasting." The one thing for him to do is to obey ; the ultimate forces of the universe will see to it that loyal obedience will bring good in the end. His fast, he explains, is meant to be an appeal to the highest tribunal, and if he does not survive the ordeal, he will go to the judgment seat with the fullest faith in his innocence.

Is the Viceroy then in the wrong ? I do not think so. He too has a religious duty. He is responsible to God for the safety and welfare of the millions of India. Mr. Gandhi's decision to fast cannot change his deliberate judgment of what that responsibility demands. If that were Mr. Gandhi's object, he would have ceased to believe in the force of truth ; his action would be rightly described as political blackmail. I do not know the secrets of Mr. Gandhi's mind. His motives may not be clear even to himself. But both his writings

and his actions in the past give ground for supposing that his decision to fast has a deeper meaning than a hunger strike. The situation has a tragic character because, as often in human affairs, it is not a right and a wrong that are in opposition, but two rights which cannot be reconciled.

The conflict is in part between the long-term issue of Indian freedom, which fills Mr. Gandhi's vision, and the short-term requirements of the war, which are the Viceroy's immediate and inescapable responsibility. But its roots go deeper. The most disquieting thing in the correspondence is Mr. Gandhi's refusal to accept the Viceroy's statements about facts. The basis of understanding and confidence is undermined. The political field has become a parched ground in which plants cannot grow. It may be that it is because he perceives this that Mr. Gandhi has chosen to fast; and, if so, he may be pointing us to the right way.

Something must have gone deeply wrong before the present impasse could have come about. It would be absurd to suppose that there is any plain or easy solution of India's vast and multifarious political and economic problems; but when all action is paralyzed by profound and almost universal mistrust, it may be simple fact that the remedy can be found only in the religious sphere. The most important question in regard to the Indian situation is whether we can find in the resources of the Christian faith the means of a fresh spiritual initiative, so that the final chapter of British rule in India may be not unworthy of the best in the past. In the present tangle of contending forces there may be no course of action that can claim to be more Christian than another; but it is much more than empty words to say that in such a situation nothing could do more to bring about a change for the better than a fresh flowering of the Christian virtues of humility, penitence, sympathy, understanding, faith and hope.

Desperate as the situation is, everything is not yet lost. As one reads the correspondence, one thing leaps to the eye—the contrast with Nazi mentality. The torrent of Indian feeling is apt to sweep this difference aside. It would be equally wrong for us to forget the events in the past that rankle in Indian memories, or the fact that tens of thousands of Indians have seen the inside of prisons and that many of their trusted leaders are now under arrest. But none of these things alter the fact that, with the fate of India, of the British Commonwealth and of the United Nations hanging in the balance, the Viceroy and Mr. Gandhi correspond as friends. There is straight speaking, but no bitterness. For the existence of these extraordinary relations Mr. Gandhi deserves the fullest credit; he has carried on a struggle for the freedom of his people without hatred and with unimpaired serenity of mind. But the British Government may also claim that its policy is a striking vindication of the fundamental difference in tradition, outlook and purpose between Great Britain and the Axis powers. The law of *satyagraha*, Mr. Gandhi says in the correspondence, knows no defeat; neither do the Christian values which have found embodiment in the British political tradition. There still remains a foundation on which courage and resource might build.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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